

LETTER

FROM

THE PRIME MINISTER

REGARDING

IRELAND.

Presented to Parliament by Command of His Majesty.



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10, Downing Street,
Whitehall, S.W. 1,

DEAR MR. REDMOND,

16th May 1911.

THE Government have been considering for some time what further action they could take to bring about a settlement of the Irish question. They have approached the subject with a deep desire to put an end to a state of affairs which is productive of immense evil not only to Ireland but to Great Britain and the Empire. The choice of alternatives open to them, however, has been narrowed by the fact that it is impossible for them, in the crisis of a war in which our safety and the liberty of most of the nations of Europe is at stake, to take action which would revive violent political controversy and so weaken or imperil the unity which is essential to the supreme necessity of winning the war. They have therefore felt that any settlement which they could propose during the war must be one which would be substantially accepted by both sides. They would have wished—in accordance with this principle—to enter upon negotiations with the Irish representatives, but this, as you know, was impossible, owing to the decision of your party not to negotiate with the Government.

The idea of the Government has been to try to effect an immediate settlement, conceding the largest possible measure of Home Rule which can be secured by agreement at this moment, without prejudice to the undertaking by Parliament of a further and final settlement of the questions most in dispute, after the war. They are therefore prepared to put forward proposals on the following lines, with a view to present action.

Firstly, they would introduce a Bill for the immediate application of the Home Rule Act to Ireland, but excluding therefrom the six counties of North-East Ulster, such exclusion to be subject to reconsideration by Parliament at the end of five years, unless it is previously terminated by the action of the Council of Ireland, to be set up as hereinafter described.

Secondly, with a view to securing the largest possible measure of common action for the whole of Ireland, the Bill would provide for a Council of Ireland to be composed of two delegations, consisting, on the one hand, of all the members returned to Westminster from the excluded area, and, on the other, of a delegation equal in numbers from the Irish Parliament. This Council could be summoned on the initiative of any six members. It would be empowered by a majority of votes of each of the delegations (a) to pass private Bill legislation affecting both the included and the excluded area; (b) to recommend to the Crown the extension to the excluded area by Order in Council of any Act of the Irish Parliament; (c) to agree to the inclusion under the Home Rule Act of the whole of Ireland, subject to the assent of the majority of the voters in the excluded area, power to be vested in the Crown in that case to extend the Act to all Ireland by Order in Council; (d) to make recommendations on its own initiative upon Irish questions, including the amendment of the Home Rule Act as finally passed.

The President of this Council of Ireland would be elected by agreement between the delegations, or in default of agreement he would be nominated by the Crown.

Thirdly, the Government consider that the financial proposals of the Home Rule Act are unsatisfactory and ought to be reconsidered. There are a number of important objects, such as the development of Irish industries, the improvement of housing in the towns, and the furtherance of education (including a better scale of remuneration for teachers), which cannot, owing to changed conditions which have arisen since the war, be adequately dealt with under the provisions of that Act without imposing an undue burden on the Irish taxpayer.

Fourthly, the Government would recommend that, after second reading, the Bill embodying the above proposals, together with the Home Rule Act, should be forthwith considered by a conference to be constituted on the lines of the Speaker's Conference on Electoral Reform, though not consisting exclusively of Members of Parliament, and meeting under the chairmanship of someone commanding the same general confidence in his impartiality and judgment as Mr. Speaker himself. The conference would, of course, have full power to suggest any alterations in the Government scheme upon which it might decide.

The Government feel that a proposal which provides for immediate Home Rule for the greater part of Ireland, while excluding that part of Ireland which objects to coming under the Home Rule Act, for a definite period after which Parliament will consider the matter afresh; which recognises the profound sentiment existing in Ireland for the unity of the country by creating a common council to consider Irish affairs as a whole; which, finally, sets up a representative Conference to attempt to adjust the most difficult questions involved, is as far as they can possibly go towards effecting a legislative settlement in the crisis of a great war.

They are prepared to introduce a Bill on these lines. But they feel that it would be idle, and I am sure you will agree with them, to introduce such a Bill unless it were assured of something like a second reading acceptance from both Irish parties. I sincerely hope that if the Government introduce this Bill the party of which you are the head will give this measure of support to proposals which will give immediate self-government in Ireland to those who wish for it, and will at the same time create and keep continuously in being the means whereby a final reconciliation between the two sections of the Irish people can at any time be brought about.

We earnestly recommend the proposals which I have outlined above to the dispassionate consideration of men of all parties. If upon such consideration a basis for immediate action is found in them we shall proceed at once with the necessary steps to carry them into effect. If this should not be the case there remains an alternative plan which, though it has been sometimes seriously discussed, has never been authoritatively proposed: that of assembling a Convention of Irishmen of all parties for the purpose of producing a scheme of Irish self-government.

As you will remember the constitution of the Union of South Africa was framed, despite most formidable difficulties and obstacles, by a Convention representative of all the interests and parties in the country, and the Government believes that a similar expedient might, in the last resort, be found effectual in Ireland. Would it be too much to hope that Irishmen of all creeds and parties might meet together in a Convention for the purpose of drafting a Constitution for their country which should secure a just balance of all the opposing interests and finally compose the unhappy discords which have so long distracted Ireland and impeded its harmonious development? The Government is ready, in default of the adoption of their present proposals for Home Rule, to take the necessary steps for the assembling of such a Convention.

I should be much obliged if you found it possible to give me your views on this letter in order to allow the Government to consider the matter before Monday.

Yours sincerely,

D. LLOYD GEORGE.

